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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the actual representation of Blacks in certain occupations and individual perceptions of the occupational opportunity structure were examined. A scale which rated the degree of perceived discrimination against Blacks in 21 occupations was administered to 75 black male, 70 black female, 1,429 white male and 1,457 white female university freshmen. Underrepresentation of Blacks in each of these occupations, according to 1970 Census data, was assumed to indicate actual discrimination. Correlations of perceived discrimination with this putative measure of actual discrimination yielded substantial and highly significant coefficients among all four race-gender groups. The perceptions of black respondents matched the measure of actual discrimination much more closely than did the perceptions of the white respondents, suggesting black students may be more likely to attribute occupational inequities to discrimination and may also be aware of actual opportunities for Blacks. (Author/NRB)

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RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN OCCUPATIONS: PERCEIVED AND ACTUAL[1]

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Racial Discrimination In Occupations:

Perceived And Actual

The major purpose of this paper was to examine the relationship between the actual representation of Blacks in certain important occupations and individual perceptions of the occupational opportunity structure in American society. The "occupational opportunity structure" refers to the openness or availability of occupations to individuals possessing characteristics that are, in fact, differentially distributed among occupations. In this study, individual perceptions (subjective assessments) of the difference that race makes in the opportunity to enter various occupations were measured. In a previous report using the data upon which this paper is based, we found that black university students perceived significantly more occupational discrimination against black people than did white students; there were no sex or social class differences (Turner & Turner, 1975).

That black students perceived more racial discrimination than did white students, however, reveals nothing about the accuracy of these perceptions. The black students, for example may have overestimated the degree of occupational discrimination. We believe that it is important to assess the accuracy of these perceptions, because sensitivity to discrimination may have important consequences for personality and behavior. On the one hand, those who assess racial discrimination accurately may be those most likely to attempt

to combat racism. On the other hand, some research indicates that perception of discrimination has negative personality consequences such as unhappiness and fatalism (Crain and Weisman, 1972), which, in turn, may limit ability to achieve. The initial issue, then is whether Blacks or Whites more accurately assess the degree of occupational discrimination against Blacks.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample was comprised of the entering freshman class at a large state university in the Northeast. There were 1,457 white females and 1,429 white males. Of 145 black freshmen, there were 70 females and 75 males.

Procedure

A questionnaire was administered as part of the testing and orientation in which all entering freshmen participate during the summer preceding entrance to the university. Among other items was a scale of 21 occupations seeking ratings of occupational discrimination against Blacks:

> "Here are some questions about discrimination in employment and advancement in some occupations... Do you this field is open to black people: (1) On the same basis as to whites, (2) Open only to exceptional black people, (3) Open to black people only on a segregated basis, (4) Not opent to black people?"

The 21 occupations used are not representative of all occu-

pations in the United States. Most are high-status white collar and professional occupations appropriate to the career plans of the university students in the sample. In most of these high-status occupations Blacks are actually underrepresented.

For the purpose of this study, underrepresentation of Blacks in each of the 21 occupations was assumed to indicate, in part, occupational discrimination against Blacks. The percent black, according to the Census, in each of the occupations used in this study was taken as the putative measure of actual occupational discrimination (U.S. Census, 1970). One might argue that reasons other than discrimination may lead to black underrepresentation in high status occupations. Despite attempts to account for the pattern by other causes, however, research has led investigators to conclude that discrimination makes an important contribution to such differential representation (Blau and Duncan, 1967).

Next, the mean ratings of perceived occupational discrimination for each of the 21 occupations was computed for each of the four race-gender groups. These mean ratings were then correlated with the percent black in the comparable occupations listed in the census data. Within the limits created by sampling only relatively high status occupations, the mean ratings were assumed to represent the perceived occupational opportunity structure, while the census percentages were considered to represent the actual occupational structure.

RESULTS

The degree of correspondence between the perceived structure of discrimination in occupations and the actual occupational structure was tested by means of Pearson correlation coefficients, separately for each race-gender group. The magnitude of the coefficients (all significant at the .05 level or better) indicates that the students' perceptions corresponded closely to the putative measure of actual discrimination. It is especially noteworthy that, as compared to Blacks, Whites' perceptions of the structure of racial discrimination in occupations showed less correspondence to the actual racial structure across occupations. The correlations for black males (.64) and black females (.63) are substantial, while those of white males (.49) and white females (.48) were moderate in magnitude. The difference between the correlations for Blacks as compared to Whites was also found to be significant at the .01 level.

In order to check whether the four race-gender groups had similar perceptions of the racial structure of occupations, Pearson correlation coefficients on the mean ratings for each race-gender group were computed. There was indeed considerable overlap in the perceptions reported by the groups, but this was especially strong within race groups, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that the respondents attributed at least a portion of Blacks' actual occupational distribution to racial discrimination. Their perceptions of discriminations were significantly related to the actual representation of Blacks in the occupations studied -- which also indicates an awareness of the occupational structure.

The substantial correlations between perceived discrimination and the putative measure of actual discrimination found among black students, compared to the more modest correlations found for the white students, probably indicates that the black students, being sensitive to discrimination against themselves, were more likely than the white students to attribute occupational inequities to discrimination. Indeed, our earlier analysis of these respondents' ratings of perceived racial discrimination in all 21 occupations combined indicated that black students perceived significantly more discrimination than did the white students. A second interpretation of the findings in the present study suggests that black students may be more aware of the actual opportunities for Blacks, since their own interests are at stake.

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U.S. Bureau of the Census. U.S. Census of Population, Vol. 1, 1970.

TABLE 1

Pearson Correlation Coefficients for the Four Race-Gender Groups on Perceived Discrimination in 21 Occupations*

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Black Males	---	.85	.75	.73
2. Black Females		---	.70	.69
3. White Males			---	.99
4. White Females				---

*All of the coefficients in this table are statistically significant at the .01 level.